SAPTA MĀTRIKAS IN LITERATURE

The development of cults in honour of several gods and goddesses involving the making of their images in stone and metal for worship necessarily created the need for a codification of their iconographic features. The different Āgamas in the South and Purānas in the north that deal with the iconography of all the gods and goddesses and comprehensive Hindu pantheon reflect the contemporary modes and trends, practices and observances in the endowment of weapons and attributes, congnizances and other features.

Details regarding the worship and iconography of the Mātrikas are to be found in a wide range of devotional literature and the Purānas, Āgamas, Saṁhitas and Tantras. Of the Purānas mention must be made of the Vāyu, Agni, Matsya, Vāmana, Bhāgavata, Skanda, Bhaviṣyottara, Brahmāṇḍa, Viṣṇu, Varāha, DeVī and Markandēya, the Āgamas include Uttarakāranāgama, Suprabhūdāgama, Purvakaṇānāgama, Amśumadbhedāgama, Viṣṇu-dharmottāra, Rūpamaṇḍana, Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra, Aparājitaprichcha, Kāranaṅga, Amaṇīya, Kāmikāgama, Vaikhānasa, Mayamata, Vāsturājavallabha, Mānasāra, Kāsyapa-silpa, Prayōgamañjari, Śilparatna. Besides these, we have Pratiṣṭha manuals like Īsānāśiva-gurudēvapaddhati. Hēmadri's Caturyārgacintāmaṇi also contains some useful information on the subject. Of the Saṁhitas mention must be made of the Brhaṣaṁhita and one of the most important among the tantra works is Hayasirṣapāṇcarātra. Apart from these, there are many Sūtras, Śatakas, Sūtras and other forms of literature providing details regarding the iconography and modes of worship of different Goddesses: these include Sāradātilaka, Brhaṭsilpasāstra, Vāstuvidya, Manuṣyalayācandrika, Mānasollāsa, Mayādīpika, Nrṣimha-
prāsāda, Caṇḍikalpa, Lakṣaṇasamuccaya, Visvakarmaśāstra, Śivadhūti, Ṣrītattvanidhi, Nāradasamhitā, Tripurasundaricalpa, Rājamātāṅgakalpa, Syāmaladanaḍaka, Lalitasahasranāma etc.

Barring a few we cannot be precise about the dates of other Āgamas. The Vishṇudharmōttara and Vaikhānasāgama are taken to be assignable to the period from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Kāmikāgama is a work of about the ninth century. Samarāṅgaṇa-sūtradhāra was written by Bhōjarāja and hence can be assigned to the eleventh century. Vāsturājavallabha and Mayamata, both written by Mandana, are of the fifteenth century. Mānasāra and Kāśyapaśilya are anterior to the fifteenth century. The Śilparatna was composed by Śrīkumāra in the sixteenth century2.

Though the Agamic, Puranic and the other devotional works dealing with goddesses are thus considerably large, attention has been focused here only on a few that deal with the iconographic details of the Saptamātrikas in a fairly elaborate manner. The iconographic features of the Mātrikas are found in greater details in the Agnipurāṇa, the Aṁśumadbhedāgama, the Purvakaranāgama, the Matsyapurāṇa, the Rūpāvatāra, the Rūpamāṇḍana, the Visvakarmaśāstra, the Śilparatna, the Śrītattvanidhi, the Dēvimahātmya, the Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa, the Viṣṇudharmōttara, the Kāśyapaśilyapādastra, the Mānasāra, the Dēvipurāṇa and others3.

The general description of Mātrikas briefly given in the Āgamas is that Brahmāṇi should be sculptured like Brahma; Mahēśvari like Mahēsvara; Vaishṇavi like Vishnu; Vārāhi as a short woman with an angry face and bearing a plough as her weapon; Indrāṇi like Indra and Chāmunda as a terrific woman. This last goddess should have her hair in a dishevelled
condition, should possess a dark complexion and have four hands. She should wield the trisūla in one of her hands and carry a Kapāla in another. All the Mātrikas are to be seated images and should have two of their hands held in the varada and abhaya poses, while the other two hands should carry weapons appropriate to the male counterparts of the female powers⁴.

**Iconographic Features of the Mātrikas:**

1. **BRĀHMAṆI**

   According to the Amśumadbhēdāgama, this Goddess has four faces and a body bright as gold. In the upper right hand she carries the Sūla and in the upper left hand an aksamāla; the lower right hand is in the abhaya pose and the lower left hand in the varada pose. She is seated upon a red lotus and has the hamsa as her vāhana as also the emblem of her banner. She wears pīṭāmbara and her head is adorned with a karandamakuta. Her situation is under a palasa tree. The Vishnudharmottara, as quoted in the Vachaspatya, gives her six hands, the left ones of which are characterized by abhaya, pustaka and kamaṇḍalu, while the right ones are characterized by varada, sūtra and śruva. It also adds that her dress in deer-skin. On the other hand, the Purvakaranāgama agrees with the first work quoted above in ascribing only four hands to Brāhmaṇi, although it states that she carries the kamaṇḍalu and aksamāla in two of her hands and holds the other two in the abhaya and varada poses⁵.

   Brahmi is described in the Devimahātmya portion of the Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa as holding a rosary and a water pot and as riding on an aerial car borne on hamsa, in another context in the same text. She is said to ride in a heavenly car yoked with swans and sprinkle kuśa-grass-steeped water. The Rūpamaṇḍana echoes the description in the Vishnudharmottara while the
Kāsyapaśilpasāstra follows the version in the Āṃśumadbhēdāgama. The Śilparatna, however, differs from Āṃśumadbhēdāgama and states that the goddess carry in her four hands daṇḍa, kamanḍalu, aksamāla and aukuśa. According to the Mānasāra Brāhmaṇi’s upper hands hold an aksamāla and kamanḍalu and the lower pair is in abhaya and varada poses and it mentions a white cloth for her garment.

The Matsyapurāṇa and Śrītattvanidhi also mention about her āyudhas. According to the Agnipurāṇa the four armed Dēvi holds in her hands aksamāla, saka and kamanḍalu.

2. MAHEŚWARI

Mahēśwari is said in the Vishṇudharmottara to have five faces, each possessing three eyes and she wears on her crown the crescent moon. Her colour is white and she has six arms, in four of the hands she carries the sūtra, daṃaru, sūla and ghanta, the two remaining hands being respectively in the varada and abhaya poses, her head is adorned with the jaṭāmakuṭa. Her banner also has the bull for its emblem.

The Devimahātmya describes Mahēśvari as seated on a bull holding a fine trident, wearing bracelets of the great serpent and adorned with a streak of the moon. The Āṃśumadbhēdāgama endows her with four arms of which two carry the sūla and aksamāla while one of the rest is in varada and the other in abhaya pose. Her vehicle is bull. Her coiffure consists of jaṭās and she is three-eyed. The Pūrvakaraṇāgama also provides the same details and prescribes for her a banner with the figure of a bull. According to the Kāsyapa-śilpasāstra, she has three eyes, four arms, red complexion, a vṛśabhadhvaja and has her abode under a bilva tree. In her upper arms she carries the sūla and an aksamāla, while the lower pair is in abhaya and
varadamudras. She wears a jatāmakuta. The Rūpamaṇḍana gives her only four arms of which three carry respectively a sūla, kapāla and khaṭvaṅga, the fourth being in abhaya. According to Mānasāra she is white-coloured, three-eyed and four-armed, the skin of a deer is her garment, two of her arms carry respectively an antelope and a paraśu while the other two are respectively in abhaya and varada poses. The Śilparatna also provides her with a white complexion and carries in her arms a trident, an antelope, a cup and a skull.

The Agnipurāṇa, Matsyapurāṇa, Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa mention about Mahēśwari and her attributes. TheŚrītattvanidhi described her with five and ten heads but the other Śilpa texts mention her with one head and four hands.

3. KAUMĀRI

The goddess Kaumāri has according to the Vishnudharmottara, six faces and twelve arms, two of her hands are held respectively in varada and abhaya poses, and she carries śakti, dhvaja, daṇḍa, dhanus, bāna, ghaṇṭa, padma, pātra kukkuṭa and paraśu in her other hands. The Devipurāṇa adds that her garland is made of red flowers and the Pūrvakaraṇāgama substitutes the ankūsa for kukkuṭa and adds that the goddess should be so sculptured as to suggest the ideas of valour and courage.

Kaumāri is described in the Devimahātmya to possess the form of Kārttikeya and hold a spear and ride on a peacock. In the Nārāyaṇistuti part of the same text she is said to be attended by peacock and cock and bear a spear. The Aṃśumadbhedaṃgama provides her with four arms by two of which she carries a śakti and a kukkuṭa, the remaining two being respectively in abhaya and varada poses. Peacock is both her vāhana and the emblem of her banner. She resides under a fig (udumbara) tree. Her makuṭa is to be bound with vasika or
vachika. The Rūpamaṇḍana describes her as bearing the form of Kumāra with peacock as vehicle and with sūla, śakti and gada as weapons. The Kāsyapaśilpasāstra describes in two verses the iconography of Kumāra which is in accordance with the stipulations in the Aṃśumadbhēdāgama. The Śilparatna, however, provides a variant description and says that she should carry in her arms an ankuśa, a pāsa and a khatvaṅga. Her garland consists of a śakti. The Mānasāra also agrees with other texts regarding cognizances like abhaya and varadamudras in the lower pair of arms and śakti in the upper left arm and a skull in the upper right arm. The Agnipurāṇa and the Matsyapurāṇa have also described in detail the features of goddess Kaumāri and her attributes.

4. VAISHṆAVI

The Vishnudharmottara states that like Brāhmaṇī, Vaishṇavi has also six hands; the right hands are characterised by the gada, padma, and abhaya and the left ones by the śanka, cakra and varada. In the Devipurāṇa, she is represented as possessing four hands in which she carries śanka, cakra, gada and padma. She wears the vanamāla the characteristic garland of Vishnu. In respect of this description, the Devipurāṇa agrees with the Pūrvakaraṇāgama.

Vaishṇavi is said in the Devimahātmya to be seated on a garuḍa holding in her hands a conch, discus, mace, bow and sword. This reveals that the goddess was conceived of with six arms. However, in the eleventh chapter of the same work only four weapons conch, discus, club and śāraṅga are mentioned as Vaishṇavi's cognizances. The Aṃśumadbhēdāgama endows her with four arms, two of which bear the conch and discus, the rest being in abhaya and varada.
mudras. She wears a *kiritamakuṭa*, her complexion is dark. She wears a yellow garment and her abode is under a *rājavrikṣa* and her vehicle *garuḍa*, whose figure also forms her emblem. The *Rūpamaṇḍana* endows her with only four arms of which three carry *conch*, *discus* and a *mace* and one is in *abhayamudra*. The *Śilparatna* is unique in its iconographic characterisation of the goddesses and says that Vaishṇavi should be sculptured with four hands holding *śanka*, *cakra*, *paṭaka*, and a chain.¹⁵

The *Agnipurāṇa*, *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, *Śrītattvanidhi* have mentioned about the āyudhas with slight differences but they are all related with the attributes of Vishṇu.¹⁶

5. VĀRĀHI

According to the *Vishṇudharmottara*, Varāhi has the face of boar and the colour of the storm-cloud. She wears on her head a *karanḍamakuṭa*. She has a big belly and six hands; in four of which she carries *danda*, *khadga*, *khetaka* and *pāśa*, the two remaining hands being held respectively in the *abhaya* and *varada* poses. The *Pūrvakaraṇāgama* says that she carries *saraṇga*, *dhanus*, *hāla* and *mūsala* as her weapons. She wears on her legs *nūpura* - anklets.¹⁷

The *Dēvimahātmya* describes Varāhi as a matchless form of Hari as sacrificial boar (Yajña-Varāha) in one context and one who graps a huge and formidable discus (*mahāchakra*) and who has tusks and a hog-like form. According to the *Aṁśumadbhēdāgama* she is boar-faced and her colour is that of a storm cloud. Her head-dress consists of a *karanḍamakuṭa* decorated with ornaments and corals. Both her vehicle and the banner of her emblem is an elephant. Her abode is under a *kalpaka* tree. Of her four arms, the upper two carry respectively a *hāla* and a *śakti* while the lower pair is in *abhaya* and *varada* attitudes. The *Dēvipurāṇa* seats her on the back of a buffalo and provides her with a *danda*, it also makes her drink blood from
a skull-pot. The Kāsyapaśilpasāstra agrees with other texts as regards the boar-face, karandamakuta and the mahiṣadhvaja and prescribes for her upper arms a hāla and mūṣala and the lower arms abhaya and varada attitudes. The Rūpamaṇḍana differs from the Aṃśumadbhēdāgama in stipulating a buffalo (in the place of an elephant) for her vāhana. She is said in the Rūpamaṇḍana to carry a bell, fly-whisk (cāmara), club and disc. The Mānasāra agrees with other texts regarding the abhaya and varada mudras in her lower arms and hāla in one of her upper arms but differs from them in prescribing a pāśa for the other upper hand.

6. INDRĀṆI

According to the Vishnudharmottara, Indrāṇi should have a thousand eyes, and should be of golden colour. She should have six arms, four of the hands carrying the sūtra, vajra, kalaśa and pātra and the remaining hands being held in the varada and abhaya poses. The Dēvipurāṇa states that she carries the ankuśa and the vajra only, and the Pūrvakaraṇāgama mentions that she has only two eyes and holds a lotus in one of her hands.

The Dēvimahātmya refers to Indrāṇi as being seated on the 'Lord of elephants' (Airāvata) and holding a thunderbolt. She is also said to dazzle with a thousand eyes. The Aṃśumadbhēdāgama prescribes only three eyes and mentions two arms and two mudras for her four hands, her upper hands are endowed with vajra and śakti, while the lower pair is in varada and abhaya attitudes. Her coiffure is of the kirīṭa variety and abode is under the kalpaka tree. Her complexion is red. Elephant is both her vāhana and the emblem of her banner.

The Rūpamaṇḍana endows her with vajra, sūla and gada in three of her four hands and an elephant as her vāhana. The Śilparatna provides her with an ankuśa, tōmara, vajra and śaṅka in her four arms. The Kāsyapaśilpaśāstra varies from the above texts in its iconographic
characterisation of the goddess and prescribes an ankuśa and abhayamudra for her two right hands and a sakti and varadamudra for her left arms. With regard to other details like her three eyes, red complexion, abode under a kalpavrikṣa tree, kiritamakuta, and gajadhvaja it agrees with Aṃśumadbhedāgama.

7. CHĀMUṆḌA

According to Vishnudharmottara, Chāmuṇḍa's seat is the dead body of a human being and she has a terrific face with powerful tusks. She has a very emaciated body and sunken eyes and ten hands. The belly of this goddess is thin and apparently empty. She carries in her hands the following weapons; müṣala, kavacha, bāṇa, ankuśa, khaḍga, khēṭaka, pāśa, dhanus, daṇḍa and parasu. To this description the Pūrvakaraṇāgama adds that she should have her mouth open and should wear on her head the digit of the moon even as Siva does, that her vāhana is an owl and the emblem of her banner an eagle. In one of the left hands she carries a kapāla which is filled with lumps of flesh, and in another left hand there is fire. In one right hand she holds a snake. She wears in her ears kunḍalas made of conch-shell.

The description of Chāmuṇḍa in the Kāsyapāsilpasāstra tallies in general with the Pūrvakaraṇāgama. According to the Aṃśumadbhedāgama Chāmuṇḍa is to have four hands, three eyes and red colour. Her hair should stand erect in the manner of bristles. Two of her hands should bear a skull and a sūla and two are to be held respectively in varada and abhaya poses. She wears a garland of skulls as yajñopavīta, is seated on a seat of lotus, wears the skin of a tiger, and has her abode under a fig tree. The Mānasāra describes in detail the ornaments of the goddess which included kunḍalas with śaṅka, hāras, kēyuras, rings with ratnas etc. The Śilparatna describes her as with a fierce face and holding in her four arms a sūla, sword, human head and skull and wearing a muṇḍamāla.
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5. Ibid., Pp 383-384


7. Misra, O.P., Iconography of the Saptamātrikas (Delhi, 1989) p.54


